

SHAKESPEARE ON JEW AND CHRISTIAN

An Interpretation of The Merchant of Venice *

BY ALLAN BLOOM

VENICE is a beautiful city; it is full of color and variety. To this day it represents the exotic and the exciting to the minds of those who know it—a port with all the freedom that the proximity to the sea seems to encourage, and with the presence of different kinds of men from diverse nations, races, and religions brought by the hope of adventure or gain to its shores. The prosperous merchants of Venice lavishly adorned it in a romantic taste combining the styles of East and West between which it was the link. Add to this the sun of Italy and the attractiveness of its people, and you have that city which remains the setting of dreams of pleasure and happiness.

Shakespeare, in his two Venetian plays, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* admirably captures the atmosphere of Venice. It is not surprising that he chose this locale in which to present his most exotic heroes; Othello and Shylock are the figures who are the most foreign to the context in which they move and to the audience for which they were intended. In a sense, it is Shakespeare's achievement in the two plays to have made these two men

* AUTHOR'S NOTE—This article is based on a lecture given at the Hillel Foundation of the University of Chicago in January 1960. I wish to dedicate it to the memory of the late Rabbi Maurice B. Pekarsky, the director of that organization for seventeen years. He was a wise and good man who inspired men of many faiths with respect for Judaism; he appealed on the highest grounds to both heart and mind. This interpretation is meant to be a companion piece to my article: "Cosmopolitan Man and the Political Community: An Interpretation of Othello," *The American Political Science Review* (March 1960), pp. 130-57. It fits into a series of Shakespearean studies that attempt to clarify the political framework in which all the plays take place. This work was begun by Harry V. Jaffa with "The Limits of Politics: An Interpretation of King Lear (Act I, Scene I), *American Political Science Review* (June 1957), pp. 405-27.

—who normally would have been mere objects of hatred and contempt—into human beings, who are unforgettable for their strength of soul. For the first time in European literature there was a powerful characterization of men so different; Shakespeare, while proving his own breadth of sympathy, made an impression on his audiences which could not be eradicated. Whether they liked these men or not, the spectators now knew they were men and not things on which they could with impunity exercise their vilest passions. Venice offered the perfect setting for the actions of Shylock and Othello because it was the place where the various sorts of men could freely mingle and it was known the world over as the most tolerant city of its time. In this city those men who it was generally thought could never share a common way of life seemed to live together in harmony.

Shakespeare, however, does not depict Venice with the bright colors which one would expect, given its beauty and its promise. When one thinks of Othello or Shylock one can only remember their somber fates; in both cases, I believe, their unhappy destinies were in some measure a result of their foreignness; or, in other words, Venice did not fulfill for them its promise of being a society in which men could live as men, not as whites and blacks, Christians and Jews, Venetians and foreigners. To understand why Shakespeare has thus presented Venice, we must for a moment consider what it meant to enlightened men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Setting

Venice was a republic; one of the few successful examples of such a political organization in its time. It had for several hundred years guarded its independence; it had an orderly form of government in which a large proportion of the citizens could take active part. It was prosperous and had even become powerful enough, in spite of its size, to cherish some imperial ambitions. During the Renaissance there was revival of the republican spirit among thoughtful men; it was thought that the proper practice

of political life had deteriorated since the fall of the Roman Republic. For whatever reasons, the political, the condition of human dignity, had become indifferent to men and they lived under monarchs. The independence and pride that are a result of self-government had vanished; the political virtues praised by the ancients had no opportunity for exercise and withered away. One can find this point of view developed most completely in Machiavelli but it was shared by many eminent thinkers. Nonetheless, they also looked for examples of the possibility of republics in modern times and Venice was the most fitting one. From the end of the sixteenth century up to the middle of the seventeenth, Venice was constantly admired and written about as the model for a good political order in modernity. It preceded Amsterdam as the model and—to name only two of its most illustrious advocates—Harrington and Spinoza drew liberally from it in the elaborations of their teachings. It was, indeed, a modern state and hence different from Rome in many crucial respects. And it is in these respects that it was of most interest to modern theorists, because it seemed to provide an answer to their central problems. Along with the taste for republicanism came a certain depreciation of the Biblical religions, partly because their otherworldliness seemed to be the source of the disinterest in the political, and partly because they were at the root of the religious fanaticism which issued in such occurrences as the religious wars and the Inquisition. These religious attachments, it was believed, led men away from their political interests and divided men on the basis of opinions. Modern republicanism had to overcome the religious question, to attach men to the here and now rather than the hereafter. The state had to become tolerant to be able to embrace men of widely differing beliefs in a stable order. This was a problem not directly addressed by ancient political thought, and its resolution is the most characteristic aspect of later political thought. It was believed that only by directing men's interest to something which could subordinate their religious attachments would it be possible to establish a way of life in which religious

doctrines and their intransigence would not play the leading part. It was not thought possible to educate men to a tolerant view nor to overcome the power of the established religions by refuting them; the only way was to substitute for the interest and concern of men's passions another object as powerfully attractive as religion. Such an object was to be found in the jealous desire for gain; the commercial spirit causes men to moderate their fanaticism; men for whom money is the most important thing are unlikely to go off on crusades. Venice was above all a commercial city and had indeed succeeded in bringing together in one place more different types of men than any other city.¹ The condition of Shylock's living in Venice was its need of venture capital for its enterprises. The laws which would not be respected for themselves are obeyed because they are the foundation of the city's prosperity. As the Merchant himself says (III. iii. 31-36, cf. IV. i. 39-43):

The Duke cannot deny the course of law
for the commoditie that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.²

The Jews in Venice were well off and enjoyed the full protection of the law in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the Venice Jewish community was relatively privileged among the Jewish communities in the Diaspora; Shylock's claim against Antonio rests entirely on that law and he is perfectly aware of its commercial

¹ For a typical and influential pre-Shakespearean evaluation of Venice, Cf. Jean Bodin, *Les Six Livres de la Republique* (Paris: 1577) pp. 726, 790. For the general understanding of Venice at the period, cf. Cardinal Gaspar Contareno, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (London: 1599). Although the translation did not appear until five years after the production of the *Merchant of Venice*, the book appeared in Italian in 1543, had been translated into French much before 1594, and was well known.

² All citations are from the Furness *Variorum* edition (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott Co., 1888).

roots. Venice was a model city for the new political thought; it was tolerant, bourgeois, and republican. This solution to the political problem is the one which became dominant in the West and is only too familiar to us.

It behooves us, therefore, to examine Shakespeare's view of that city which contained the germ of what is today generally accepted. He did in that city, as I have said, present his view of the relations between men who are foreign to one another. This is the link between the two Venetian plays. He understood the hopes based on the Venetian experiment and, as the fates of his heroes show, he was pessimistic about the possibilities of its success. This is not to say that he did not approve of what Venice stood for; but he tried to understand the human consequences of the legal arrangements, and he found that friendship between such unlike personages is very difficult, if not impossible. Laws are not sufficient; they must also be accompanied by good dispositions on the part of those who live under them. Shakespeare presents the depths of souls as no man has ever done and through his divine insight we can catch sight of the difficulties which stand in the way of human brotherhood, difficulties which are real and cannot be done away with by pious moralizing.

The Conflict

Shylock and Antonio are Jew and Christian and they are at war as a result of their difference in faith. It is not that they misunderstand one another because of a long history of prejudice and that enlightenment could correct their hostility; rather their real views of the world, their understanding of what is most important in life, are so opposed that they could never agree. And when confronted with one another in the same place in relation to the same people, they must necessarily quarrel. Their difference as to whom and on what terms one should lend money is the most external sign of this root and branch opposition. To do away with their hostility, the beliefs of each would have to be done away with, those beliefs which go from the very depths to the heights of their souls; in other

words, their being would have to be changed, for men are constituted most essentially by their understanding of the most important things. The law of Venice can force them to a temporary truce, but in any crucial instance the conflict will re-emerge and each will try to destroy the spirit of the law; for each has a different way of life which, if it were universalized within the city, would destroy that of the other. They have no common ground.

Antonio and Shylock are, however, not merely individuals who differ; Shakespeare, rightly or wrongly, has presented them as types, representatives of Judaism and Christianity. Each acts according to the principles of his faith; they do not differ because they are men who have idiosyncrasies but because their principles are opposed; those principles are not their own but are derived from their respective religions. Of course, we do not see them in the purity of their worship; they act in the corrupt world of private and political life; but we do see the extension of their principles in that world. Antonio and Shylock are each depicted as models of their heritage; each is even a parody of a remarkable Biblical figure, not as those figures were but as they might be in the context of Venice. Shakespeare views them from outside without considering the truth of either.³

³ Shakespeare, unlike the earlier dramatists who presented Jews, seems to have gone back to the Bible to find his characterizations rather than use a traditional image. His Jew is Jewish in his profession of faith; his principles are recognizable. And it is similar with the Christian. Shakespeare seems to have taken a certain side of the Old Testament and added to it the criticism of the Jews made in the Pauline *Epistles*. One might look especially to *Romans IX-XI*; the opposition between Shylock and Antonio might well be characterized as that between "a vessel of anger and a vessel of mercy." Or, more generally stated, the issue is precisely the quarrel between the Old Law and the New Law, each presenting its own evaluation of what is the most important element in piety and the morality consequent upon piety. The two Laws are related but inimical. Shakespeare is, I believe, far more interested in Antonio's principles than in Shylock's. The Jews were not a problem in England; there were none, or practically none; and his audience was Christian. But Antonio's origins are somehow in Shylock's law, and he can only be seen in terms of those origins and his opposition to them. This is parallel to the New Testament's treatment of Jesus. The confrontation of the two is a re-enactment of the original confrontation but altered and embittered by the unhappy history of fifteen hundred years. Cf. the dialogues between Antonio and Shylock (I. iii. 40-187; III. iii. 3-28; IV. i. 39-124).

Shylock holds that respect for and obedience to the *law* is the condition for leading a decent life. Throughout the play law is his only appeal and his only claim. Righteousness is hence the criterion for goodness; if a man obeys the law to its letter throughout his life he will prosper and do what is human. No other consideration need trouble him. Justice is lawfulness; Shylock is a son of Moses. Along with this goes a certain positive temper; Shylock lives very much in this world. Money is a solid bastion of comfortable existence, not for the sake of pleasure or refinement but of family and home. The beggar is contemptible and was probably not righteous. This earth is where man lives and justice and injustice reap the fruits of reward and punishment on it. Decent sobriety is the rule of life, each man living for himself according to the rule. A certain toughness and lack of far-ranging sympathies characterize him.⁴

Moreover, shrewdness concerning the things about which the law does not speak is perfectly legitimate and even desirable. To live well on this earth one must have some amount of substance, without which life is miserable; given the nature of men, one is likely to lose what properly belongs to one, if one is not careful. Shylock's model is Jacob who had to deceive his father to attain his succession and who used tricks to get a fair wage from Laban (I. iii. 74-100). So he is a moneylender; he does not cheat men, he only takes advantage of their need. If a man wants money, for his business or his pleasures, he can make use of what Shylock possesses. Shylock does not care for the man or his interests but through them he can profit himself. What he does is neither noble nor generous, but it is not unjust. Why should he concern himself with Bassanio's prodigality or his hopes to make a good match for himself? Would it not be folly to waste one's sympathy and one's substance on the vices of others? Shylock lives privately in his "sober home" with his daughter, and this way of life is protected by his shrewdness and the money which he earned with it.

Antonio, on the contrary, bases his whole life on generosity and

⁴ IV. i. 150, 94-108; II. v. 30-40.

love for his fellow man. For him, the law, in its intransigence and its indifference to persons, is an inadequate guide for life. Not that one should ignore the law, but it is only a minimum condition. Equity and charity are more important virtues than righteousness. Antonio has money; it is, however, not for his own enjoyment but rather for his friends; he lends his money but not for profit. Life on this earth is but a frail thing and only gains whatever allure it has in seeing others made happy. Antonio is sad and life does not mean much to him. Life is but a stage and our actions take on meaning only in a larger context. Antonio is perfectly willing to die for his friend to prove how much he loves him. Calm calculation is beyond him. He makes promises he cannot keep and his hopes are based on ships that are yet to come in. The restraint and the coldness of the Jew are not his; his sympathies go out to all men and he cares much for their affection. He is full of sentimentality. He has no family and we hear nothing of his home; he is a bachelor (I. i. 5-11, 98-109, 164-170; iii. 133-140; II. vii. 38-52; III. ii. 309-314; IV. i. 75-88, 120-24).

Antonio and Shylock are not made to understand one another. When Shylock sees Antonio approaching he says "How like a fawning publican he looks," echoing the sentiments of the Pharisee in the Gospel who prides himself on his own righteousness and despises the publican's abasement before the Lord.⁵ Antonio in his turn has, in imitation of Jesus, driven the moneylenders from the Rialto. He has spit on Shylock; for his sympathy cannot extend to a man who denies the fundamental principle of charity (I. iii. 110-140). That is the limit case. Neither can regard the other as a human being in any significant sense because in all that is human they differ. It is very well to tell them to live together, but in any confrontation of the two they are bound to quarrel; what is prudence for the one is robbery for the other; what is kindness for the one is mawkish sentimentality to the other. There is no middle ground since they see the same objects as different

⁵ *Mark* xviii. 10-14. Shylock's righteousness is in general the parallel of that of the Pharisee.

things; common sense cannot mediate between them. If there is to be harmony, one must give in to the other; pride, at least, if not conviction, precludes this. But the two men need one another; they are linked by money. Antonio must borrow from Shylock. They have a contract but one that is not bound by good faith.

In this not very funny comedy, the most amusing figure is the clown, Lancelot Gobbo. And he is so amusing largely because he represents the ridiculousness of the man who tries to live in the worlds of Antonio and Shylock at the same time; everything is so different that he is like someone who wants to stand on his head and his feet at the same time. He works for the Jew but his conscience tells him that the Jew is the Devil; so he wants to leave the Jew, but his conscience tells him he must do his duty. His conscience, that great instrument of moral guidance, tells him he must go and stay at the same time. Lancelot is utterly confused. Ultimately he follows the only thing he knows surely, his stomach. Shylock's parsimony has left him hungry; also, Bassanio gives pretty uniforms, a thing unthinkable in the home of the austere Jew. There seem to be no rules of moral conduct which can govern the relationship between men so diverse. Lancelot draws out the paradox of the situation when he discusses Jessica's conversion with her. She can, he says, only be saved if her father was not her father; but if her sin of being the Jew's daughter is removed, then she will inherit the sin of her mother's adultery. She is damned if she does, and damned if she doesn't. Besides, Lancelot, on his gastro-economic grounds, is against conversion because it will make the price of pork go up (II. ii. 2-29; III. v. 1-25).⁶

Shylock states his principle for relating to the Christian community in which he lives as follows: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talke with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eate with you, drinke with you, nor pray with you" (I. iii.

⁶ Lancelot carries his confusion further in his relations with his father, whom he respects and despises, thus mixing the responses of Portia and Jessica. His father, in this play which has so much to do with fathers, is blind. Lancelot, moreover, also parodies the loves between foreigners in this complicated world (III. v. 36-41).

33-39).⁷ What is most important to him he cannot share with his neighbors. When men do not agree about what is most important, they can hardly be said to constitute a community. *Othello* is about a man who tried to assimilate and failed.⁸ In the *Merchant of Venice* we see the soul of a man who refused to assimilate. He is consequently distrusted and hated. He reciprocates and his soul is poisoned.

The Meaning of Compromise

Shylock makes one compromise with his principle. He goes to dinner at Bassanio's. Punishment is swift and harsh. During the dinner he loses his daughter plus a considerable sum of money. Everything that he has held most dear is gone; he becomes a monster intent only on revenge. It is no longer principle which guides him, for he has compromised his principle by disobeying the law. He can only think that Antonio arranged the dreadful deed, although Antonio apparently knew nothing of it.⁹ Shylock recognizes that no one cares for him, that his sorrows are the joys of others. No humiliation could be more complete; as a man with dignity he can only make others suffer for what he suffers. Others have counted him out of the pale of humanity, and he will show them they were right in doing so. Formerly, he was bitter, but he had his little life in which he could practice his faith and enjoy his home. Now this is all gone. He has a certain grandeur in the depth of his rage, but he has become terrible. The strong impression he makes is based only on that which is negative in him. How could he forgive, when he would only be despised for his forgiveness? If he cannot be loved, he can at least gain the respect of fear.

⁷ Shylock's faith cuts him off from others; moreover, it gives him a different notion of the things that really count.

⁸ Cf. my article cited in the author's note. Mr. W. H. Auden has subsequently proposed an interpretation of *Othello* not unlike my own in this respect. See "The Alienated City," *Encounter* (August 1961) pp. 3-14.

⁹ What causes Shylock to change his mind and go to eat with the Christians is unclear and can only be a subject of conjecture (II. v. 14-21). There is no indication that Antonio knew of the abduction (II. vi. 69-75). But Shylock takes it as a conspiracy known to and supported by the whole Christian world (III. i. 22-23).

But now his life is carried on only in response to the Christians whom he hates; it has no solid content of its own. In this portrayal Shakespeare, to some extent, gives justification to the Christian reproach that the Jews had lost the one most important thing and carried on only the empty forms of their law.

Shylock is not a comic figure. There is no scene in the play in which he is meant to be laughed at in person. He does appear comic in the eyes of some of the Christian actors, but this only proves that Shakespeare did not agree with them and is as much of a commentary on them as on Shylock. He is most comic to Salerio and Salerio who burlesque his screaming after his ducats, his daughter and his ducats (I. vii).¹⁰ Shylock is reproached, as were the Jews in general, for materialism, a materialism which made it impossible to make proper distinctions between things. And this is borne out by Shylock's conduct, but in no ignoble way. For him, as we have said, life is an earthly thing and his money is connected intrinsically with his existence. His affection for his daughter is based on the fact that she is his flesh and blood (III. i. 32-34). The so-called spiritual ties do not exist for him; everything he has belongs to him in the same intimate way that his body belongs to him. There is no distinction between spirit and matter; the relation of souls alone without the other bonds is impossible; therefore, a universal humanity is excluded. Kinship is the source of love, hence his real loves are his family and his "sacred nation."

When Shylock talks to Tuball about his daughter and his money, he does indeed express the sentiments attributed to him by his ridiculers, but they appear very differently to us (III. i. 75-123). He would like to see his daughter dead with the jewels in her ear. We are shocked by the distortion of the sentiment but

¹⁰ This scene not only describes a comic Shylock but also gives a description of the parting of Bassanio and Antonio. This, too, in its way, has elements of the comic, although they are not intended by the speakers. And it also reveals the pretence in Antonio's selflessness; Bassanio is reminded of the risks his friend is taking for him when Antonio tells him to forget them. The scene cuts in both directions.

we also see that his daughter is more a part of him than his money, that this is an expression of the depth of his loss. Jessica does not belong to him anymore; all he can count on now is his money. She has broken the law and defied him. She is no more and he must forget her for she existed as a human for him only so long as she was faithful. It is a hard code, but the passion and discipline that is required to obey it are a measure of what it means to Shylock. As Jessica was hated with intensity when she left the fold, so she would have been loved if she had remained within it. Shylock's daughter is dead to him but also part of him has died. The feeling of which Shylock is capable is seen in the admirable response he makes when he hears that Jessica has bartered for a monkey the turquoise he gave his wife. "I would not have given it for a wilderness of monnies" (III. ii. 115-116). This is the expression of a man practiced to a parsimony of sentiment but whose sentiments for that reason are deep and unutterable. It is different from the effusiveness of Antonio's expressions of love; but is it not equal?

The most quoted speech in the *Merchant of Venice* is the one which best of all shows the plight of Shylock (III. i. 47-66):

"I am a Jew; Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, demotions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same foods, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same Winter and Sommer as a Christian is; if you prick us doe we not bleede? If you tickle us, doe we not laugh? If you poison us doe we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that."

Shylock justifies himself by an appeal to the universality of humanity. Behind this harsh but touching complaint is also a plea for the exercise of the golden rule. Men can only be men together when they recognize mutually their sameness; otherwise they are like beings of different species to one another and their only similarity is in their revenge. But, sadly, if one looks at the list of similar characteristics on which Shylock bases his claim to equality with his Christian tormentors, one sees that it includes only things which belong to the body; what he finds in common

between Christian and Jew is essentially what all animals have in common. The only spiritual element in the list is revenge.¹¹ Like Antiphon, the Sophist, Shylock asserts that the brotherhood of man can only come into being on the basis of the lowest common denominator; and that common denominator is very low indeed. It is the body; all the higher parts of the soul must be abstracted from, because they express men's opinions and beliefs about what is good and bad, virtue and vice; and these, men do not share; these beliefs make men enemies. Shylock appeals to a humanity which all men can recognize but in so doing he must discount what all noble men would regard as the most important. Shylock stands for Judaism and his life has gained its sense from that fact, not from the fact that he eats, drinks and feels; Christianity has played a similar role in the lives of his opponents. They would have to transform their beings in order to become unified. The choice seems to be a hostile diversity on a high level or a common humanity on the level of the beasts, a common humanity grounded on an indifference to the opinion about the nature of the good. The four Jewish names in the *Merchant of Venice* seem to be drawn from two successive chapters, x and xi, of *Genesis*. Chapter xi has as its theme the Tower of Babel; perhaps this is part of Shakespeare's meaning. "Let us go down and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." Men's separateness is an act of Divine Providence.¹²

¹¹ Shylock characteristically mentions laughter as a result of tickling. He and Antonio would not laugh at the same jokes.

¹² Tubal x, 2, Chus, 6, Jessica (Jesca) xi. 29. The latter two names are spelled otherwise in the King James version, but appear as they are here in the translations which follow the Greek of the Septuagint, and they were so spelled in translations at Shakespeare's time (*cf.* note 21). Shylock poses a greater problem and its origin can only be conjectured. But in the same passage is a name which comes closer to it than any other and is repeated six times (x. 24, xi. 12, 13, 14, 15); it occurs both before and after the account of the Tower of Babel. This name appears as Salah in the King James but is spelled *Shelah* (the last syllable is pronounced as ach) in the Hebrew, and so it appears in the English version of 1582. This is very close indeed; and the Hebrew spelling of this name is almost the same as that of the only other Biblical name which has been suggested as a possible source: Shiloh (*Genesis*. xix. 10). Given that Shelah occurs in the same passage with the other names, it seems probable that he is Shylock's ancestor.

Portia and Her Suitors

Whether or not Shylock originally intended to exact the pound of flesh if possible, after the loss of Jessica his whole hope is to be able to gain revenge within the limits of the law. The drama of Shylock and Antonio would have come to a disastrous end if it had not been for Portia. We must now pause to consider her role in the play before examining the famous trial scene. The contrast between Portia and the other two major figures is sharp and pointed; and the difference in atmosphere between Belmont and Venice is striking. Portia brings with her a love of gaiety, satisfaction, subtlety and above all, common sense that is entirely lacking in Venice. While scenes of hate are being unfolded in Venice, at Belmont Portia presides over a feast of love—love, not in the sense of Antonio's spiritual love for Bassanio, but the erotic love between man and woman. Portia is the master of this world of Belmont and her own satisfaction is the highest law of the land. She has no doctrines and she is willing to appear to be anything to achieve her ends. She rules, and rules for her own good while always keeping up the appearances of propriety and justice. Belmont is beautiful and there we enter the realm of the senses; it is Pagan; everyone there speaks in the terms of classical antiquity; religion is only used there; and there is a temple as well as a church; the themes of conversation and the ideas current in Belmont have an ancient source; Portia has the tastes of a Roman and is compared to one whose name she shares (I. i. 175-76.)¹³

Belmont too is a cosmopolitan place but the attraction there is not money but love. Men from all over the world come to woo the fair Portia and she is able to see and evaluate what the wide world has to offer. She is no cloistered little girl. She presents a typology of national characters in going over the list of her suitors—the horse-loving Neapolitan, the severe Pole, the drinking Ger-

¹³ The temple is mentioned at II. i. 50; Portia's use of religion is indicated in III. iv. 29-35. Portia would seem to be representative of classical *eros*. All myths and examples cited in Belmont are drawn from classical antiquity.

man, and so forth. She judges them each in relation to the commodity of a pleasant shared existence. Her candor when she is alone with her servant is shocking to some and exasperating to others; but it can also appear to be the clear vision of one who is liberated and has spurned the unhappy depths of tragedy. Portia rejoices in the beauties of the surface and certainly no one can assert that her hedonism leads to vulgarity. She chooses for her husband a fellow countryman after having seen all that is exotic and strange. She is the opposite of the shy, untutored Desdemona. She opts for the familiar not only because it is the familiar but also because it represents most adequately what is agreeable and appropriate to her; Bassanio is a sort of mean in relation to the other suitors, just as is his nation speaking geographically.

The test of the three caskets shows the principles implied in Portia's choice as well as it pre-figures the technique she will use in the trial. Portia is apparently not the mistress of her fate; she is ruled by the will of her father who has decreed that the man who is to win her must first pass a seemingly foolish test of character. Portia professes dissatisfaction with this arrangement, but as a good daughter she intends to abide by the restriction. She does not, like Desdemona or Jessica, defy conventions to gain the object of her wishes; she has a great respect for the forms, if not the substance, of the conventional. The test is, moreover, not entirely disagreeable because its conditions drive off many an undesirable suitor who might otherwise be importunate. She uses her traditional duty to satisfy her desires but she, as becomes clear, does not become its victim. The first suitor who risks the choice is a Moor who begins his wooing with the request: "Mislike me not for my complexion." He is in certain respects like Othello but rendered comic in the atmosphere created by Portia. He is a great warrior and a passionate lover, full of noble words. This hasty man of the South chooses the golden casket because of its appearance. He is a slave of his senses. Portia who has treated him with elaborate politeness, dismisses him from her thoughts with "Let all of his complexion choose me so." She is no Desde-

mona who "saw Othello's visage in his mind."¹⁴ She makes no effort to transform her immediate sensual impressions. She knows the sort of man who would be to her taste.

As the Moor was immediate, sensual and passionate, Aragon is is the cool, reflected gentleman of the North. He is a pious moralizer, full of the most correct commonplaces. He chooses the moderate silver and the basis of his judgment is the text. He chooses to have his just deserts, but is angry when his deserving turns out to be less than what he conceives (II. ix. 1-86). Aragon is a fool who thinks that the accents of virtue constitute its essence. Portia sees in him only a bore. The Moor chose by images, Aragon by texts. Neither was right. Portia seeks a man who can combine feeling and thought in a natural grace of sentiment. The South is barbaric, the North cold and sententious. True civilization implies a mixture of developed understanding and reflection with a full capacity to perceive; one must both see things as they are and react to them appropriately. Texts and images must go together as a natural unity.

Portia wants Bassanio. She is aware that he is not a hero, that he is not her equal. She knows his weaknesses and even the fact that he hopes to recoup his fortunes by marriage. But she also sees that he is a nice man, a man of refined sentiments and a true gentleman. He does not sermonize, and he is balanced and graceful in his judgments. He is neither primitive nor over-civilized. He has no eminent virtues but he pretends to none; and he has no marked vices. He is a mean; he is both handsome and cultivated. Bassanio is also no fanatic. He is the only one of the Venetians who does not instinctively hate Shylock. He always treats him like a man, indifferent to the doctrines which separate them. He is surprised and shocked at Shylock's conduct; he does not expect it, and even encourage it, as does Antonio. Bassanio is humane and simple. Like Portia, he approaches the world with no preconceptions but lets impression and taste guide him, but his is an educated taste. He loves Portia and Portia wants him. So

¹⁴ *Othello* I. iii. 254.

she cheats and lets Bassanio know how to choose by the song she sings. It depreciates the senses and its meaning is clear. Moreover, the first rhyme is *bred* with *head*, which also rhyme with *lead*. Bassanio's own reflections are very just and show a capacity to put text and image together, but he is assured of choosing aright by the song. Portia does this delicately; but, by using the convention which seems to limit her, she becomes the master of her fate. She breaks her faith but in such a way that the appearances are saved, thus preserving the principle without being a victim of the principle. The law is only a means to an end with her.¹⁵

Portia and the Law

Portia goes off to Venice to save Antonio, not out of any principle of universal humanity but because he is her husband's friend and Bassanio is involved in the responsibility for his plight. She leaves on the pious pretext of going to a nunnery to prepare herself for marriage, and takes on a new appearance, that of a boy (III. iv.).¹⁶ She becomes a representative of the law and interjects herself as such between the warring Jew and Christian. The situation between them has become intolerable; only senseless bestiality can be the consequence. Shylock lives only for revenge; the law supports him. He desires the flesh of Antonio although it can profit him in no way. There is no compromise possible (IV. i. 20-74).¹⁷

¹⁵ The authority of the father is like that of the law and is supported by it. Both are binding and unmoving; and law gets its authority from the ancestral, from the fact that it was given by the fathers. Hence Portia's experience with her father's law and what it means to her prepares her for dealing with the law in general, not as a lawyer, who by profession is committed to the law, but as one who stands outside the law and sees its relation to life and happiness. Shylock on the other hand, simply takes his authority and his law for granted; or, otherwise stated, he identifies the law with the good.

¹⁶ It is a man's world, but men are no longer able to control it, so the woman must become a man and restore the balance.

¹⁷ There is a strong resemblance between this scene and the accounts of the crucifixion in the *Gospels*, with the role of the Duke paralleling that of Pilate (cf. *Matthew* xxvii, 17-23; *Mark* xv 8-15; *Luke* xxiii 13-25). Shylock's insistence that Antonio die and his unwillingness to say why are parallel to the Jews' conduct in relation to Jesus. Without Portia, the conclusion would have also been similar.

Shylock knows that he is hated and that he can never have respect from the others. He has no private life to which he can retreat with dignity. That is all gone. He would seem weak or cowardly if he gave in. Antonio, on the other hand, is not entirely averse to martyrdom. It fits in well with his general melancholy and he can prove his great love by dying for Bassanio. He can make an ever living memorial for himself in the guilt of his friend whom he expects to write an epitaph for him (IV. i. 120-24).¹⁸ Only by altering the law can this absurd situation which law never intended be avoided. But the essence of the law is its fixity. Only a Portia, indifferent to the law but aware of its power, can manipulate it.¹⁹

Portia understands Shylock's intention very quickly; she knows that law is what counts for him. So she presents herself at the beginning as the severest interpreter of the law, which wins Shylock's confidence. First, in a most direct and frank way she tries to settle the case without chicane. Shylock must be merciful. She does not appeal directly to his simple humanity; she knows that Shylock is a Jew and that she must begin from there. She tries to suggest a common ground on which Jew and Christian can meet and not the low one of animal nature. She tries to show that both have the Scripture in common, that they pray to the same god with the same prayer, the Lord's prayer. Christian and Jew do share on a high level and neither need step out of his faith to experience the unity. And the present case is covered by the community of faith. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Equity and Mercy stand above the law (IV. i. 207-11).²⁰ But this noble attempt does not succeed, at least with Shylock. The interpretation

¹⁸ Antonio seeks martyrdom; Portia will not allow it to him.

¹⁹ Portia gives the appearance of total indifference to persons which is proper to the law: "Which is the Merchant here? and which the Jew?" (IV. i. 181). But she has prepared her case, and it is a discriminatory one. And Shylock transfers his devotion from the religious law to the civil law: Law as law is respectable to him. This is Portia's great insight.

²⁰ "Therefore Jew... we do pray for mercy." The Lord's prayer (*Matthew*. vi. 9) is meant to be a distillation of common Jewish teachings. The specific teaching about mercy is frequently referred back to *Ecclesiasticus* xxviii.

of the meaning of the same Scripture differs too much between the two. The law, and only the law, is still the highest for Shylock.

Portia tries a second mode of reconciliation through the mean motive of profit. This too fails and now Portia starts using her wiles. First she gains Shylock's acceptance of her adjudication by the appearance of strict interpretation of the law. He puts himself completely into her hands; "a Daniel, come to judge me." Then, by a series of steps which we need not recount, she turns the tables on Shylock and deprives him of his revenge, his fortune, and his Judaism. Her means are contrary to all good legal proceeding. Portia, in demanding that the flesh be cut to the exact weight and that no drop of blood be spilled, makes it impossible to achieve ends that have been agreed to be legitimate. With particular reference to the blood, she asks for a miracle: flesh must have the qualities of non-flesh; that would be as great a miracle as the reverse. Shylock's faith in the righteousness of his cause apparently does not go so far as to count on divine intervention. The age of miracles is past.

Portia has maintained the appearance of the law and the case is settled. Shylock suffers terribly; and with the loss of his revenge he has lost strictly everything. Someone had to suffer in this terrible affair and Shylock was the one who in justice should do so. He insisted on the inhuman. The war of Shylock and Antonio could not go on and Portia decides in favor of Antonio. Venice is a Christian city and Antonio her husband's friend. If the cancer of civil discord must be rooted out, then Shylock is the one to go.

Conversion is no solution (IV. i. 397-419).²¹ We can all see Shylock is now a dead man. Justice has not been done to him in any complete sense. Shakespeare wishes to leave a doleful impression of the impossibility of the harmonious resolution of such problems. He does this with the unforgettable picture of Shylock's grandeur and misery. But Shylock is not a nice man.

It has been remarked that Shylock's reduction to nothingness is too quick and too improbable. Is it plausible that Shylock who

²¹ At the end all the main characters are still present, except for Shylock.

has evinced such pride would give in to Portia in such a cowardly way? This would make him like those Jews of the earlier literature who are only devices of the plot. I believe that those who make this objection have missed the genius of the trial scene. It is not by cowardice that Shylock is reduced but by respect for the law. He was proud and resolute because of his conviction of his righteousness; when he no longer has the law on his side, he collapses. He has accepted Balthasar as a second Daniel and whatever she reveals the law to be, is law for him. "Is that the law?" he questions (IV. i. 329). Shakespeare has maintained the unity of the character—as the law was Shylock's heart and soul it is the cause of his destruction, and in this he attains to the dignity of tragedy. He is a dupe of the law. He has never reflected that the law might be a means to an end and hence only an instrument which might be variable in relation to that end, nor that laws depend, at least in some measure, on human frailty. Portia has taken on the name of Balthasar; that was the name of Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar.²² She is a law-giver who mediates between Belmont and Venice and harmonizes justice with law. She, according to Shakespeare, understands the limits of law. This is the poet's picture of the Jews, a people great by its devotion to the law but deceived by it.

Antonio, too, suffers from Portia's victory. She is aware that the ties which bind Bassanio to Antonio are very strong. If Antonio had died those ties would have poisoned Bassanio's life. She frees Bassanio from that onus; and then, with her deception concerning the rings, she forces Bassanio to admit explicitly the superiority of his love for Portia over everything else. She substitutes her lusty, gay, physical love for the gloomy spiritual love that united Bassanio and Antonio. And Antonio is forced to speak up as guarantor for the new fidelity, which he had earlier challenged (V. i. 273-80; cf. IV. i. 296-301; IV. ii. 469-71.)²³

²² *Daniel*, I. vii. In the King James version the name is Belshazzar, but it was frequently spelled Balthasar following the Greek (cf. note 11).

²³ The obviously erotic symbolism of the rings contrasts the basis of Portia's power over Bassanio with that of Antonio's.

Reconciliation

The conclusion of the trial is too unhappy a theme on which to end a comedy. Venice is an unpleasant place, full of ugly passions and unfulfilled hopes. It must be remembered that Portia only plays the role of a *deus ex machina*; the ugly truth remains that, if her improbable appearance had not been made, revenge and blood would have been the result. She has done nothing in principle to resolve the problems which led to the war of Shylock and Antonio. And there is no resolution. We can only hasten back to Belmont to forget them.

Belmont is the seat of love; but it does not exist; it is an utopia.²⁴ What is not possible in Venice is possible here. The only love affair that takes place in Venice is a sordid one. Jessica without the slightest trace of filial piety remorselessly leaves her father and robs him. She is one of the very few figures in Shakespeare who do not pay the penalty for their crimes; and disobedience to one's parents, be they good or bad, is a crime for Shakespeare; so is robbery. But somehow the atmosphere of Belmont changes all of this. It is a place where there are no laws, no conventions, no religions, just men and women in love.

Jessica escapes to this never-never land with her Christian lover and is saved (V. i. 1-22).²⁵ Here the past is transformed in the glow of Eros; the duties of everyday life appear the concerns of drudges; duty is not the fulfillment of virtue but the burden of necessity. There is, indeed, a harmony in the world; it is the harmony of the eternal order. In Venice we forget this, but Lorenzo reminds us in his great Platonic speech (V. i. 63-98).²⁶ We participate in one cosmos and every soul is a reflection of that

²⁴ It is literally nowhere; it is unknown in Italy. I take it to be the elaboration of men's prayers; that best place which indicates the perfection which is unattainable in ordinary life with its accidents and necessities. Etymologically it is "beautiful mountain." Could it be Parnassus?

²⁵ On the first level, it is clearly Jessica's conversion that saves her. But the other difficulties are overcome by the magic of the place. At the beginning of their scene in the garden, Jessica and Lorenzo recite a list of unhappy lovers whose loves were either forbidden by parents or divided by a nation.

²⁶ Cf. Plato, *Republic* X. 616d-617d, and John Burnet on "Shakespeare and Greek Philosophy," *Essays and Addresses* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926).

cosmos. This is the harmony to which all men as men can attain. But because we are "grossly closed in" by a "muddy vesture of decay" we cannot hear the music of the spheres. It is only through the effect of music that we touch from time to time on that higher world; and many men no longer have any music in their souls. We are all human on a high level and can have complete unity. But the accidents of life force men into customs that cause them to forget the whole and the immortal part of themselves; the nations have no time for music. The ultimate harmony of men is a harmony not on the level of their daily lives but on that of a transcendence of them, an indifference to them, and assimilation to the movements of the spheres. Hence humanity is attainable by only a few in rare circumstances, but it is potentially in all of us and that is what makes us humans. The realization of Belmont does not solve the problems of Venice; it only mitigates their bleakness for those who understand. Portia, the goddess of love, can orchestrate a human harmony for a few.

Shakespeare does not understand Judaism for he saw it from the outside; he looked at it, as no man rightfully can, from a purely political point of view. But he was personally less interested in the question of Judaism than in man's attempt to become man and man alone. He was of the conviction that it was of the nature of man to have varying opinions about the highest things and that such opinions become invested in doctrine and law and bound up with vested interests. When confronted with one another these opinions must quarrel. Such is life and that must be accepted with manly resolution. In Venice and modern thought, there was an attempt to cut the Gordian knot and unite man, not on the level of their truly human sameness but that of the politically beneficial—a unity expressed in men's universal desire for gain. The consequences of this must either be conflict or a bastardization of all that is noble and true in each of the separate points of view. Venice had the adorned beauty of a strumpet. Shakespeare was not willing to sacrifice for this illusion the only true beauty which lies somewhere beyond the heavens for the happy few.